

Why Seek the Living Among the Dead?

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First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)

Unitarian Universalist

Easter Sunday

April 12, 2020

(text of live-streamed worship)

Call to Worship and Lighting of the Flaming Chalice

We have gathered for worship on this Easter Sunday.

In the midst of whatever these challenging days have brought to each of us, may we also feel the spirit of Easter rising....

Spirit of the love we have for one another.

Spirit of the hope we have for the health and safety of... everyone

And of this dear Earth, our shared home.

Spirit of the joy we feel as we awaken to the beauty of spring.

Spirit of the God of many names,

surely God of love, hope, and joy embracing us all.

And may the flame of our chalice - flame of truth, of freedom, of community, of love – symbol of our Unitarian Universalist faith, remind us of all that we share, wherever we may be.

Story for all ages

This brief story is appropriate for any time, but, as I hope you'll see, including for Easter and spring. It comes from the ancient Taoist teacher Lieh-tzu
(from *Lieh-tzu: A Taoist Guide to Practical Living*, by Eva Wong)

There was a man who spent three years sculpting a piece of jade into a leaf. He presented his masterpiece to a prince who was very impressed by it and became his patron.

The leaf looked so real that if you placed it among real leaves you could not tell the difference. Everyone remarked that it was a very beautiful piece of art.

However, when Lieh-tzu heard about this he quipped, "If nature took three years to make a leaf, then we'd be in trouble."

Thus, the sage knows that no matter how we try to imitate the works of nature, nature still does a better job.

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Well, it seems to me that among all the lessons of Easter is the reminder to be utterly amazed by the beauties of nature, how apparently effortlessly new leaves sprout from dry wood, flowers spring from damp earth...

Just as new life grows in due time in our hearts from the soil of sorrows and loss and challenge...

New life – whether love in our hearts or flowers in spring – a miracle either way.

Meditation and Prayer

May we now pause, slow down, breathe into this moment, breathe into full presence, body, mind, spirit... feeling our shared presence in spirit, even at a distance... feel held by the love we have for one another... and by the love that embraces all...

And on this Easter Sunday, when we know only too well that many are in the depths of Good Friday suffering and despair, our prayers to the God of blessings rise:

Continued prayers of gratitude for all those tending to the health and well-being of our sisters and brothers who are ill, gratitude for all those meeting essential needs for food, medicine, transportation...

Gratitude for teachers and musicians and poets meeting our need for learning and for beauty...

And for leaders guiding us with truth and wisdom and knowledge through these days.

That the sick will be healed... the hungry be fed... the homeless be sheltered... that all will be safe this Easter Sunday and always...

May we pause in silent communion... wherever we are... whoever we are... whatever our circumstances...

Readings

Luke 24:1-5

On the first day of the week, very early in the morning, the women took the spices they had prepared and went to the tomb. ² They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, ³ but when they entered, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. ⁴ While they were wondering about this, suddenly two men in clothes that gleamed like lightning stood beside them. ⁵ In their fright the women bowed down with their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, "Why do you look for the living among the dead?"

"This Morning" by Mary Oliver (from the collection *Felicity*)

This morning the redbirds' eggs
have hatched and already the chicks
are chirping for food. They don't
know where it's coming from, they
just keep shouting, "More! More!"
As to anything else, they haven't
had a single thought. Their eyes
haven't yet opened, they know nothing
about the sky that's waiting. Or
the thousands, the millions of trees.
They don't even know they have wings.

And just like that, like a simple
neighborhood event, a miracle is
taking place.

Message – “Why do you look for the living among the dead?”

When Jesus was crucified the disciples scattered.
One imagines in utter despair and sorrow.

Then ... how did Easter resurrection happen for the disciples mere days later? How does resurrection – renewal, new life – happen for us in the wake of our sorrows and losses?

Well, I don't know what the biblical resurrection means in any literal sense. But whatever truth there may be in the story, here's part of it I expect we can all understand, and it is actually pretty simple. It has to do with the times Jesus's followers began to re-gather... and how when they re-gathered they experienced something they called resurrection.

The women at the tomb to begin with. They were asked by the mysterious figures outside the tomb “Why do you seek the living among the dead?” It was then, when the two women were together, that they had a glimmer of resurrection... of life continuing, life abundant... in the felt spirit of Jesus.

And a little later, it was when disciples were walking the road to Emmaus – together – that they experienced resurrection, a palpable sense of the presence of Jesus.

Haven't many of us had something like this experience after a dear one has died? When we gather, whether in a small circle or a large service, sharing stories about our loved one, we feel her or his spirit once again among us and in our hearts though no longer at our sides... along with a glimmer of how we may be able to go on after all, life abundant again... after all.

Actually, you see, it seems to me that we humans are made for going on, we are made to grow into new life from old, we have evolved or been created to be able to meet all sorts of challenges and grow into new life. The singer and founder of Sweet Honey in the Rock, Bernice Johnson Reagon once put it this way:

Life's challenges are not supposed to paralyze you, they're supposed to help you discover who you are.

Who you are: New life (or deeper, more real life) from old, even from death or terrible suffering.

This message is not just about our own human lives of course. Hardly. The message is in the daffodils. The message is in the skunk cabbage for that matter.

And in the spirit of the Taoist story I shared earlier, it's a good thing *we* aren't responsible for making all those daffodils, skunk cabbage, not to mention thousands upon thousands of leaves on maple and oak – or those redbird chicks in Mary Oliver's poem.

Nature does a fine job, thank you, and infinitely more efficiently.

We *can*, though, help nature's life out in modest ways – tending our gardens, pruning our trees, keeping the bird feeders full... polluting less...

Similarly, it is a good thing we aren't entirely responsible for the healing of our own spirits or of the spirits of others. But we do partner with the life within us and in others, the life that is ever seeking healing and health - resurrection.

We begin this partnering with the spirit of life through tending our personal gardens – resting, slowing down... seeking the solace and inspiration of nature's beauty... and of music and poetry and art.

And we partner with life's spirit through all of the ways we help one another... Eastering one another as it is sometimes put: these days maybe doing errands for someone, making masks or making calls... with gratitude for all those putting their own lives at risk as they Easter others, whether as health care workers, grocers, farm workers, bus drivers... for even in the midst of Good Friday can be also Easter – the Easter of love and hope, the Easter of kindness and help... the Easter of simply gathering together – whether in the same room or, as for most of us most of the time these days, on a screen or over the phone.

Easter always possible, just within reach, not only *after* Good Friday but in the midst of Good Friday. This is the nature of life after all, Good Friday and Easter co-existing, sorrow and joy co-existing.

Did we think life was meant to be always easy? Always without suffering?

As my father (a surgeon who knew something about the suffering life could bring)... as he once said in response to that vain hope: “welcome to the human race.”

For the question as a member of the human race is not how we can eliminate *all* illness and hardship (because that we cannot do). The question is how can we respond to and ameliorate the illness and hardship that come with being human.

The answer *is* Eastering in all the ways and more I've suggested... Eastering, which almost always includes drawing together – these days even at a distance. For like the women at the tomb or the disciples on the road to Emmaus, it is when we are together that new life most readily grows – within each of us and among us all.

Coronavirus will pass... months or perhaps over a year from now the virus will be largely in the rearview mirror, not eliminated but largely tamed and managed.

Will life then be just as it was before the pandemic?

Actually... I hope not.

Rather, my hope: As coronavirus recedes, my hope is that we continue to partner with one another and with the spirit of life (call that spirit God if you like...) life which is always seeking to be life more abundant... on this dear Earth... and creating a world of more fairness, justice, peace, love... to bring the beauty of all the helping that is going on right now into the lives we share with one another and with all life... always...

So may it be.

Closing Words and Benediction

In Time of Silver Rain, by Langston Hughes

In time of silver rain
The earth puts forth new life again,

Green grasses grow
And flowers lift their heads,

And over all the plain
The wonder spreads

Of life, Of life, Of life.

In time of silver rain
The butterflies lift silken wings
To catch a rainbow cry

And trees put forth
New leaves to sing
In joy beneath the sky.

When spring

And life
Are new.

In this spirit, perhaps the question for this time: What new life is struggling, maybe even ready, to be born?

Be well. Be safe. Take care of one another.

May it always be so. Blessed be. Amen.